

GUANTANAMO BAY

Guantanamo Bay is the large natural harbor on the southwestern coast of Cuba. It has been a United States naval base since it was captured from the Spanish in 1898 and leased in perpetuity from the Cuban government. The place is now infamous as the location of the extra-territorial detention facility for prisoners captured in the undefined “war on terror,” but over the intervening century it has figured in the lives of thousands of Navy men and women, who remember it with varying degrees of affection as “Gitmo.”

My own introduction to Gitmo was in 1947 when I was a Midshipman on board the U.S.S. Randolph on the Naval Academy summer cruise of that year. I remember little about the place except for the recreational facilities and especially the soda fountain. It took me another twenty years to discover beer. The Caribbean segment of the three-month cruise had been exciting, as my duty section had assumed the aircraft orientation portion of the training curriculum. This involved regular training flights from the aircraft carrier as crew in either the TBM-3 torpedo-bomber or the SB2C dive bomber, including the thrills of catapult take-off and wire-arrested landings on the carrier flight deck. It was high excitement for a twenty-year-old! Two of those adventures stand out: Early one morning, just after dawn I was riding in the open-cockpit rear gunner’s seat on the SB2C. It was a beautiful morning with scattered clouds and the sun just rising over the Caribbean and I saw four waterspouts grouped more closely together than I would have thought possible – a rare weather phenomenon.

The second adventure was more serious. Again in the SB2C, we were flying in a tight four-plane formation. It was an extra chance for a flight because the planes were being delivered from the Randolph to the U.S.S. Kearsarge, the Randolph’s accompanying carrier. It was only a short “hop” from one deck to the other. As the aircraft grouped in formation it was necessary for the fourth aircraft to slide under the one just ahead of our own. As it did so, the wing of the higher plane dipped and made contact with the vertical stabilizer on the tail of the lower. It was minor as collisions go, but it folded the top part of the stabilizer over the rudder, obviously making the plane difficult to control. Furthermore there was the possibility that the entire tail assembly might be damaged, compounding the danger. It all happened in my own clear view and within the few feet that separated the planes in formation. I. all ended well. The sturdy tail assembly held together and the plane landed aboard safely, though with difficulty.

The next time I visited Guantanamo the circumstances were quite different. It was five years later and I was now a junior-grade lieutenant and a deck officer aboard the U.S.S. Raymond, about which there is more elsewhere. The Raymond had completed a yard overhaul and was undergoing a nine-week Underway Training Exercise at Guantanamo. I was at a difficult point in my Navy career the facts of which will also get their treatment elsewhere in my Navy saga. The UTE involved practice, performance and evaluation of any and all of the operations that might be expected of the Destroyer Escort type vessel. Ships left the harbor daily for exercises in both surface and anti-aircraft gunnery¹ and such

¹ It was a chance to exercise our new computerized AN/SQS-10 anti-aircraft fire control system. The computer was housed in a compartment about 8’X10’ in deck-space filled deck to overhead with drawers of vacuum-tubes. The actual computing-power was about that of the Commodore 64 and now far less computing capacity of an ordinary

mundane drills as fire, radiological decontamination and man overboard. The daily cycle of getting under weigh and returning to harbor were mandatory opportunities for deck officers to practice the ship-handling skills involved in weighing anchor and maneuvering the ship into the procession of ships leaving harbor, and the intricacies of bringing the ship to anchor in precisely the assigned anchorage amidst the confusing variables of wind, tidal currents, and other ships at anchor in the vicinity.

The entire Underway Training Exercise concluded with a set of drill and performances evaluated by a visiting team of officers. One of the evaluations was performance of a man-overboard drill in which a floating dummy is tossed overboard and the ship turned to pick it up as quickly as possible and preferably on the lee side of the ship. A standard maneuver for that purpose is famous as the "Williamson Turn." I was the Raymond's champion in that performance. Accordingly, I was placed on the OOD watch at the time most likely for the "surprise" exercise to happen. I was fully [re]pared. At least I thought I was. How swiftly things can change! But that, I suppose, is what surprise drills are all about. If one were to look carefully at a chart of the approaches to Guantanamo Bay, they would notice a small promontory of land just east of the harbor entrance. With a southeast wind, that promontory creates a sharp division between the sea-chop and flat sheltered water. The division creates a tidal rip with a confused wave action. That was precisely where the sly examiners chose to drop the dummy! The lookout who was supposed to keep sight of the dummy lost it in the confused sea and I ran the Raymond in circles, never finding the dummy!

That event was an embarrassment. What happened later was near-disaster!